

Documents on Diplomacy: Resources

Biography: Dean Acheson

Introduction

Dean Gooderham Acheson served as Secretary of State from January 21, 1949 through January 20, 1953, and exerted significant influence on U.S. foreign policy during his tenure.

Rise to Prominence

Born on April 11, 1893, Acheson grew up in Middletown, Connecticut, and attended the Groton School, followed by Yale University, and then Harvard Law School, where he was elected to the Harvard Law Review.

In his early career, Acheson clerked for Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis and then joined the law firm Covington and Burling prior to entering the Franklin D. Roosevelt Administration as Under Secretary of the Treasury.

In 1941, Acheson began his career at the Department of State as Assistant Secretary of State for Economic Affairs, a position that gave him a front-row seat to the increasing tensions between the United States and Japan that led to war. In this capacity, Acheson oversaw the U.S. oil embargo of Japan.

After World War II, Acheson remained in the Truman Administration as Under Secretary of State for Secretary of State James F. Byrnes. In the 1940s Acheson also represented the United States in negotiations that led to the creation of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, the Food and Agriculture Organization, and the International Monetary Fund. Acheson was appointed Secretary of State by President Harry S Truman on January 21, 1949.

Influence on American Diplomacy

As Secretary of State, Acheson played an important role in shaping U.S. policy during the early Cold War. Acheson enjoyed a good working relationship with President Harry S Truman, who often allowed Acheson to be the first official to speak on record about U.S. foreign policy decisions. Although Acheson supported the containment of communism and the tenets of the Truman Doctrine, he was also a realist who recognized that



the Soviet Union was not only an ideological opponent, but also a viable global power that had to be viewed as a serious geopolitical challenge to U.S. interests. This belief shaped Acheson's approach to the many foreign policy challenges that faced the United States during his tenure.

Chief among these was the question of what to do with Germany and how to prevent future Soviet influence there. To this end, Acheson supported the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949, a defensive alliance geared to counter the Soviet threat to Europe while ensuring that the western part of Germany was tied firmly to the West.

Although Europe was Acheson's primary focus, he also faced questions related to international control of atomic weapons; the fall of mainland China to the communist forces of Mao Zedong and the retreat of the U.S.-backed nationalists to Taiwan; the rebuilding of Japan as a

cornerstone of U.S. policy in East Asia; the Korean War; and Soviet designs on Yugoslavia, the Middle East, and Asia.

Senator Joseph McCarthy ultimately singled Acheson out for "losing" China to the communists.

Acheson continued to have influence on U.S. foreign policy after leaving the Department of State. During the Kennedy Administration, Acheson sat on the Executive Committee created to address the Cuban Missile Crisis. Later in the decade, Acheson served as an advisor to the Lyndon B. Johnson Administration for how to disengage from the war in Vietnam. Acheson died at the age of 78 in 1971.

Bibliography

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